

# **The Medill CCO Monitor:** Defining the Competencies for C-Suite Success

**Summary of Survey Findings | February 2026**

## Overview

The Chief Communications Officer (CCO) role has never been more complex or critical. Today's CCOs are expected to operate as business strategists, trusted advisors, and stewards of reputation in an environment defined by complexity and constant change. Drawing on insights from 125 senior leaders, this report offers guidance to help future communications leaders prepare for the C-suite.

## Respondents

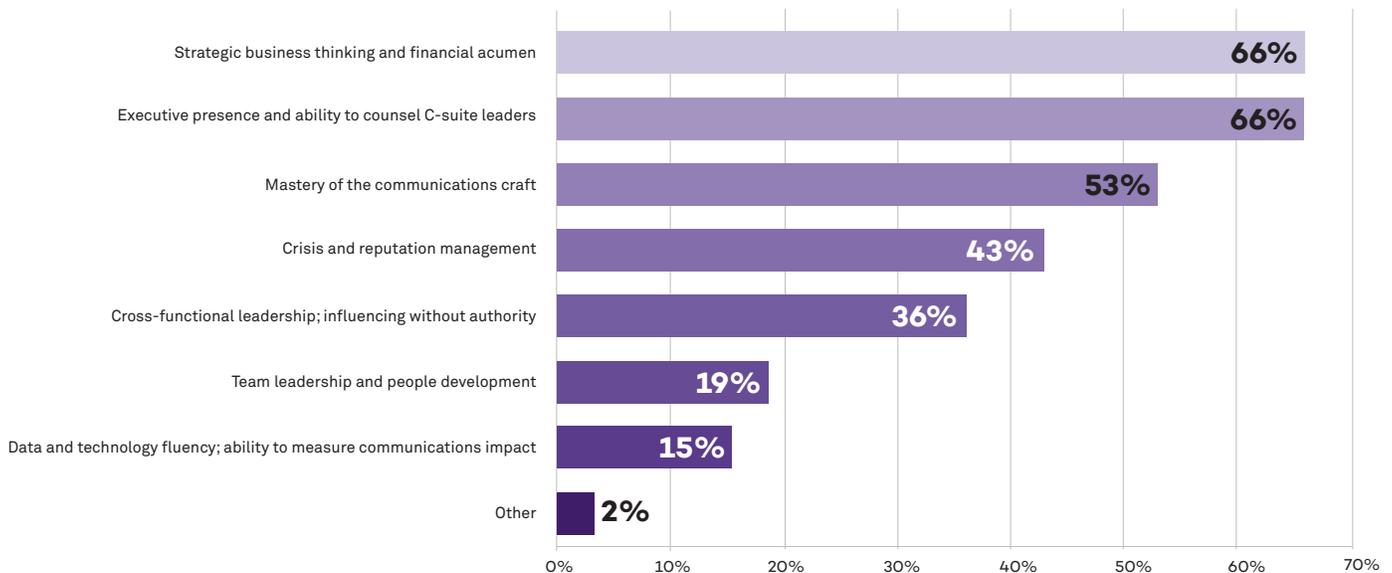
- 125 senior communications executives from a cross-section of industries
- 91% serve as the most senior communications leader in their organization or have done so in the past
- 53% have served in the senior communications role for more than 8 years
- 72% are from organizations with 5,000+ employees

## Key Insights

### CCOs are Business Leaders, Not Just Communicators

When asked what skills are most important for today's CCOs, respondents rated "executive presence and ability to counsel C-suite leaders" and "strategic business thinking and financial acumen" ahead of communications mastery, reflecting the need for CCOs to operate as full members of the executive team, not just functional experts.

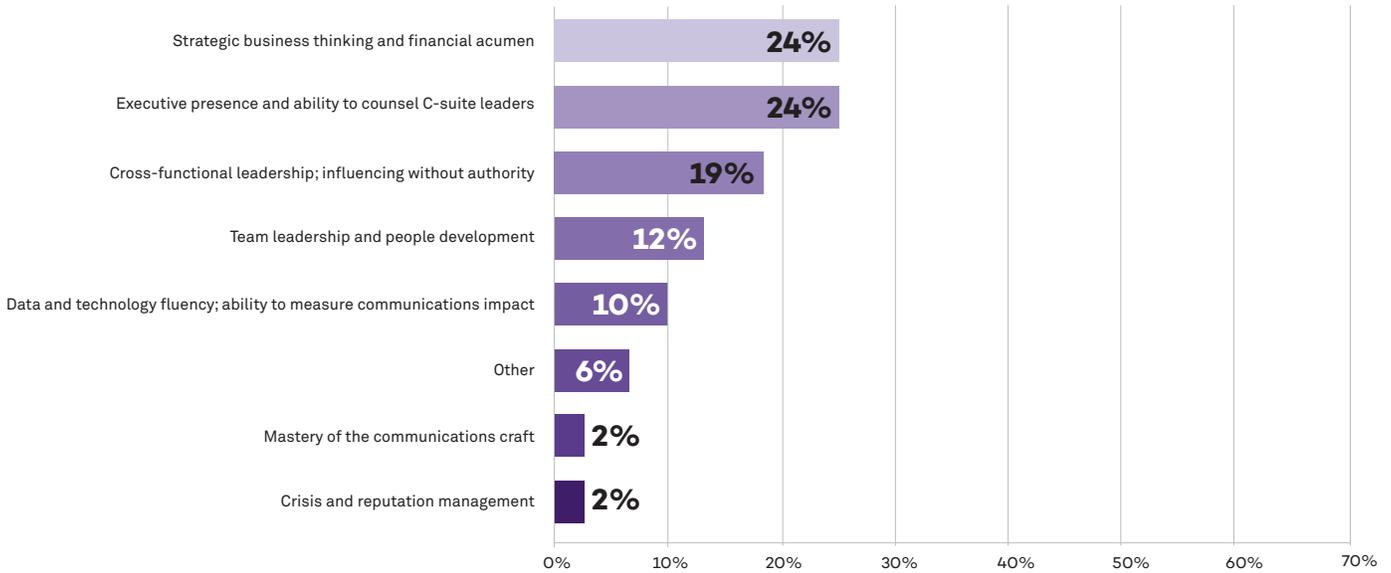
### What three skills are most important for success as a CCO today?



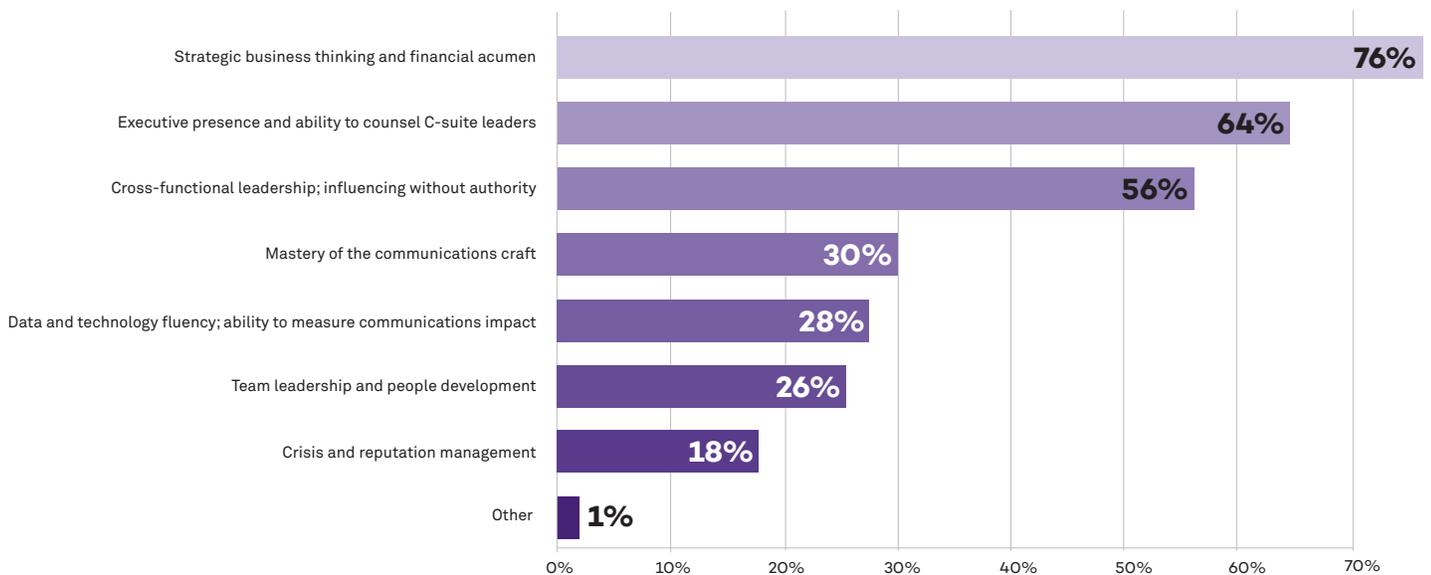
## Executive Leadership and Business Acumen are Common Development Gaps

Respondents cited executive presence and financial acumen as the most critical skills for CCO success, yet these were also the two areas respondents most needed to strengthen after advancing into senior leadership. They also noted similar trends within their teams today, highlighting the need to cultivate these capabilities much earlier in communicators' careers.

### Which skill did you most have to develop on the job after becoming a senior communications leader?



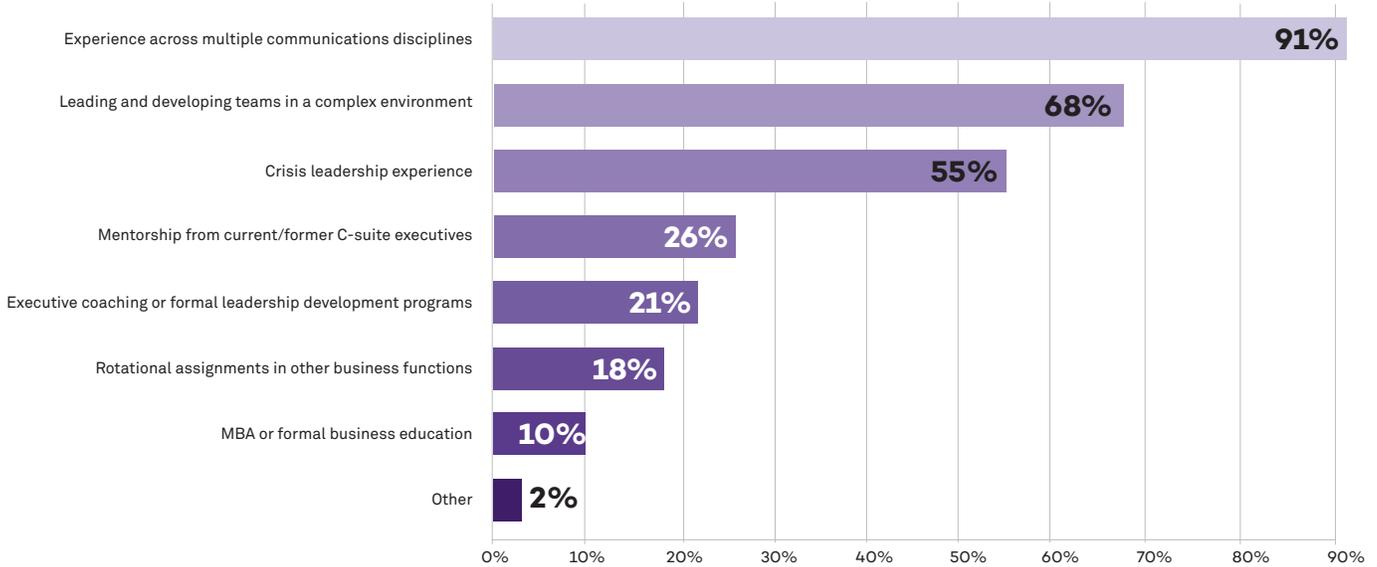
### Which skills do senior leaders on your current team most need to develop to be ready for the CCO role?



## CCO Readiness Is Built Through Cross-Disciplinary Work, Team Leadership and Crisis Experience

Respondents overwhelmingly agreed on the experiences that best prepare future CCOs: working across communications disciplines, leading teams, and managing crises. These findings underscore the importance of building both breadth across the function and depth in high-stakes leadership situations.

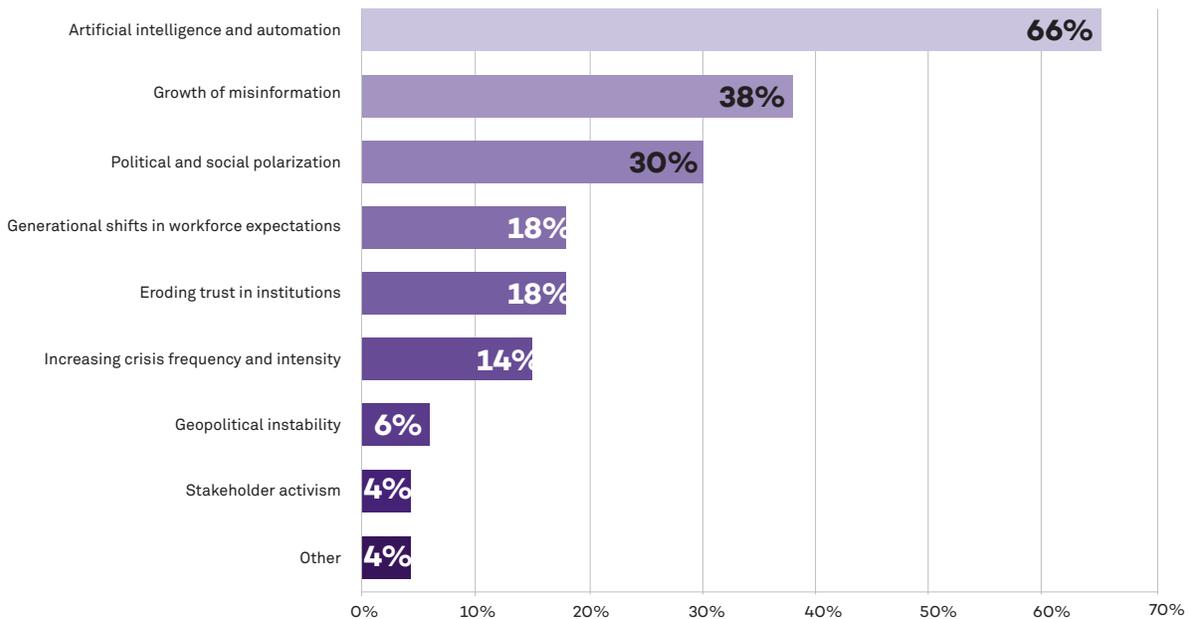
### Which professional development experiences matter most in preparing future CCOs?



## External Forces are Reshaping the CCO Role

AI, misinformation, and polarization top the list of external forces CCOs expect to shape their role over the next 3–5 years. Tomorrow’s leaders must be prepared to manage trust amid rapid change and rising skepticism.

### Which two external forces will most challenge the CCO role in the next 3–5 years?



## Notes from the Field: Advice on preparing for the CCO Role

108 respondents provided open-ended comments when asked for advice to future CCOs. Three key themes emerged:

### Prepare to be a business leader first, a communications leader second

- “Learn as much about other parts of the business as deeply as you can ... the higher you move up, the less it becomes about ‘communications’ and the more it becomes about the business as a whole.”
- “Communications leaders who thrive connect their work directly to business metrics.”
- “Future CCOs need to be comfortable operating as true business leaders... That means understanding the commercial, political, and cultural dynamics shaping your company and being willing to take a seat at the decision-making table, even when you have to pull up your own chair.”
- “The most effective communications leaders I know can dissect a quarterly earnings report and explain how their work impacts key business metrics.”

### Develop leadership, judgement and influence

- “Leadership at this level is about judgment, empathy, and ethical decision-making.”
- “Learn to tell senior leaders what they don’t want to hear — calmly and clearly.”
- “Mentorship and team development are essential...we rise by developing others to lead.”
- “Agility and an ability to live in the ‘grey’ area amid so much ongoing transformation and change is a deeply important skill to master.”
- “Comms leaders live in the grey area, where there is often never a clear right or wrong answer and we have to regularly make quick decisions without having all the information. There’s no way to teach this in a book or lecture... you have to live and experience this type of environment.”

### Stay curious and keep learning

- “Read widely. Stay curious about technology, economics, and human behavior.”
- “Challenge yourself to constantly learn and grow. Develop yourself so you can support, challenge and develop others (your teams, your stakeholders, etc.)”
- “Lean in and be first to the table on AI. Hire people who see it as an amplifier, not a threat.”
- “The pace of change is relentless. Senior comms leaders must: Keep refreshing skills (from AI prompt engineering to global regulatory shifts). Learn adjacent disciplines (finance, operations, policy). Be comfortable with unlearning outdated practices that no longer serve.”

## Methodology

The survey was conducted in connection with Medill Executive Education between September 16 and November 3, 2025. An online survey was sent electronically to senior communications executives across a variety of industries. Respondents completed the survey voluntarily.

## About Medill Executive Education and The Medill CCO Monitor

Medill Executive Education equips current and future leaders with the strategic, analytical, and executive-level competencies required to navigate today's rapidly evolving journalism, media, and integrated marketing communications landscape. Through immersive learning experiences and curricula informed by scholarly research and industry practice, Medill helps executives shape the future of their organizations, their industries, and their careers — through skill refinement, network building, and leadership readiness. *The Medill CCO Monitor* provides an evidence-based, industry-validated view of the modern Chief Communications Officer and the competencies required to lead amid constant change and rising expectations.

To learn more about Medill Executive Education and The Medill CCO Monitor, email [medill-execed@northwestern.edu](mailto:medill-execed@northwestern.edu)